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K.C. Boey

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# Beyond the 5Ws + H: What Social Science Can Bring to J-Education

**K.C. Boey**

*Journalist, Melbourne*

THE pen is mightier than the sword. This axiom of journalism is at no time more apposite than in this terror-ridden post-9/11 world. Increasingly, nation-states and activist bloggers are realising that the power of the media and those who control it set the agenda for world politics and governance. Yet journalism educators reflexively trust this maxim among their charges to received wisdom. Or pedantically go on presuming this aphorism to be ingrained in them by the time they finish high school media studies. In this, educators sell short students – and fall short of their larger responsibility to our broken world – neglecting the development of future journalists in a critical area of their calling.

The might of the pen – or more precisely the keyboard in today’s electronically wired world – rests on two planks. The first is the substance of people dialogue and communication, mediated through the media. The second is the style of that communication.

In the training of journalists in Australia, it seems that style has raced ahead of substance. It used to be that this did not much matter. When people were more of like mind, more alike in manner, speech, dress and appearance – as in the time of White Australia – there was less variance to tip toe around.

Yet time has changed, and with it the changing face of a modern Australia. Likewise, on a global scale, an ever-shrinking world brought into at times stifling proximity by ever-advancing technology. The changes such new encounters between people have wrought have elicited pessimistic and optimistic scenarios.

Against the despondency that Samuel Huntington<sup>1</sup> advances in his *Clash of Civilisations*, there are those excited by the prospect of increasing convergence of peoples open to the sharing of ideas, and their cultures. Yet the prospect of a celebration of difference presents challenges; challenges that have hitherto not tested previously homogeneous peoples, and for which previously dominant elite have been poorly equipped to deal with. One such is the challenge confronting an “old” journalism and the media in Australia left trailing in the “new” reality of its multicultural present.

In the Australian experience, journalism education is focused on the mechanics of writing: style – who, what, why, when, where, and how; on design, layout and

presentation. Little is taught on the substance of living together – culture, history, politics, economics and the other building blocks of life. It shows in many of today's graduates who step out of the university gates and step through the doors of our newspapers and other media.

At a community seminar in Melbourne in September 2006 hand wringing on the race-ridden riots on the beach of Cronulla in Sydney the previous December, the culpability of the media came in for examination.

"If they (the media) didn't start the fire (of riot), they certainly poured accelerant on it," said panel member Associate Professor Lynette Sheridan Burns, head of the School of Communication Arts in the University of Western Sydney.

At another forum examining Cronulla, at a Sydney conference on "*Everyday Multiculturalism*", Andrew Jakubowicz, professor of writing, journalism and social inquiry at the University of Technology Sydney, lamented: "The role of the media in communicating and reinforcing ideas about folk devils, through the creation of moral panics, is well documented. Amplification of apprehension on all sides, polarisation of views, and mobilisation of action required active media involvement."

It's an indictment on multiple fronts of a media viewing the world overwhelmingly through the prism of its dominant community. Sensationalist appeal to base instinct is the least of our concern. A confusion of roles of the media is disturbing. An ignorance of the new dynamic in today's diverse Australia – and the responsibility this places on the media – may be fixed by education. The paranoia surrounding our fear of the unknown and unfamiliar is worrying. Most problematic of all is an implicit criticism of a retreat to claims to triumphalist conviction – Fukuyamaesque-like – that humanity has arrived at the end destination of life's journey, and that therefore we no longer need to work to extend the boundaries of our innovation and creativity.

To the extent that media is but a mirror of the community of which it is a product, and which it serves, this confusion of roles and demands on today's media is reinforcing a populism disdainful of complex engagement between peoples on complicated issues.

How the media has come to be called to the Burns and Jakubowicz account might be attributed to the cohort that has come into the profession since the Dawkins education reforms of the 1980s. In the social ideal of the Australian Labor Party of the time to extend access to tertiary education, John Dawkins as education minister "upgraded" colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology to university status, as part of larger reforms. Journalism has come to be a vocation rather than a calling from then. The vocational antecedent of many of these latter-day universities persists, the journalism courses they offer among them. Pretensions to the gentrification of the working-class facade – as in the incorporation of communication/media theory subjects – led to the dilution of journalism programmes, to the detriment of intellectual rigour.

Media performance in reaction to the hysteria among sections of the public after September 11, 2001, exposed shortcomings in this new cohort. Remedial courses of action have included public examination of the failings of the media. One such was the conference on Islam and the media convened by the University of Technology

Sydney's Australian Centre of Independent Journalism, in December 2006. "*The Journalist and Islam Conference*" paraded an impressive line-up of panelists presenting learned papers, among them from notable journalists. There was no discussion on (media) training; the journalists in incubation. "Old-school" journalists regurgitating reactive impulses might be akin to shutting the gate after the horses have bolted.

The old-school paradigm is born of journalists being a product of the community of which it is a part, with all their excellence and shortcomings. This world-view is best represented by the premature claims to finality in liberal democracy as defined by Francis Fukuyama<sup>2</sup> in his *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama's is the 1990s prescriptive agenda of the "civilising the natives" project romanticised in Joseph Conrad's Africa.

Today's reality gives credence to Richard Rorty's<sup>3</sup> suspicion of the essentialist Heideggerian account of the West as a "finished-off object". It is accepting of Rorty's alternative notion of the West as "a continuing adventure" (in conversation with the East). It is a goal worthy of consideration for incorporation in the teaching of journalism.

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## How's This to be Done?

The Asian Studies Association of Australia has been down this road from the early 1990s. The teaching of Asia remains a point of contention between educationists sold on dedicated Asian studies centres and others advocating study across the curricula; should teaching be concentrated in one department or be required study across faculties – from the humanities to the natural sciences, engineering and architecture? It's a false dichotomy of the binary mindset.

Teaching across the curricula need not be mutually exclusive of the dedicated (specialist) Asian studies department. Likewise the competing claims forced on journalism (print and electronic) and communication/media theory and the arts by economic rationalism of our institutions of higher learning.

In the siege circumstance that education institutions find themselves, it is incumbent on educators in the teaching of journalism not to lose sight of education in its broadest sense: to prepare their charges for the world beyond the university gates; beyond the mechanics of the 5Ws + H. The better journalists are those who have come from other disciplines, or at least those who have taken on fields of study in addition to journalism. Journalism educators need to be alive to draw on the academic excellence at hand from among their peers in politics, economics, culture, society and the natural sciences, and incorporate them into their journalism programmes.

On the external front, journalism educators have an obligation to prepare their charges as Australia seeks to engage in the region, and to find a seat in the councils of Asia. This is imperative in today's terror-ridden and broken world, increasingly drifting further apart between rich and poor.

I will be delighted to hear that I have been ill informed on the state of the teaching of journalism in Australia.

**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Huntington, Samuel. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Touchstone.
- <sup>2</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Penguin.
- <sup>3</sup> Rorty, Richard. 1991. 'Philosophers, Novelists, and Intercultural Comparisons: Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens', in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. ed. Eliot Deutsch. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. pp.3-20.

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K.C. BOEY is a former editor of *Malaysian Business* and *The Malay Mail* (in its previous incarnation) in Malaysia, now working as a journalist in Melbourne while at the same time continuing to be published in Malaysia. He studied politics and culture at Monash University, and has never taught media or anything at any level.  
Email: [kc.han@bigpond.com](mailto:kc.han@bigpond.com)